

The last word: Out of the dark—building a community audience

by the Editors

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Most of the time, films are thought of as fairly autonomous objects. They exist either without an audience, or with an ideal, abstract, and homogeneous one. Even radical filmmaking and film criticism frequently reflect this underlying assumption. Some filmmakers, such as Costa Gavras and Pontecorvo, are considered radical for injecting left political content in traditional film form, while others, such as Godard and many Latin Americans, are radicals for altering form to present a left wing result.

But, as long as a film audience sees such films after buying a ticket, sitting in isolation during a screening, and leaving when the lights come back on, nothing much of political significance will happen. Political consciousness and action grow out of study, discussion, exchange and struggle. As long as the film experience is passive, a particular film's political message will either be accepted or rejected on the basis of what the audience already knows or feels. For sure, *BATTLE OF ALGIERS* and films like it stir up incredible emotions, but when this emotion is not linked to knowledge and understanding or directed toward social action, it dissipates very quickly.

For film to have a truly political use and effect, there must be some intervention in the viewing situation. In their manifesto, "Toward a Third World Cinema," Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino painted out this need for participation of the audience. In the 1960s Newsreel people traveled with their films and used them to raise consciousness and organize. More recently, women's liberation groups have used films to attract women and initiate discussions.

In Toronto recently, with the help of Tricontinental Film Center in the

United States, a group of people started the Development Education Centre (DEC) to distribute relevant political films on a non-profit basis. DEC's idea was not just to distribute the films, but to use them very specifically as educational tools. To further this concept, they sponsored monthly film forums where the films were shown and then discussed. After each forum they ran off and distributed a newsletter which summarized the discussion.

In turn, these screenings served as a meeting place for political and cultural activists. By the third forum, plans to develop a cultural festival had begun. The newsletter report began,

“This meeting was a result of the wish to continue the discussion of the previous week and the desire to progress from talk to practical manifestations of cultural ideas—the suggestion was made to work toward a cultural festival.”

Also, the forum offered militant Québécois filmmaker Arthur Lamothe an opportunity to show and discuss his film on the construction industry in Québec. The DEC forums demonstrate the energizing power of combining radical films with audience discussion.

A closely related question is that of the actual audience. A film's political impact obviously must be measured by the real audience that sees it. If a filmmaker simply proclaims her or his film was made for workers, but it's never shown outside of university walls, the claim is more than a little ridiculous. Similarly, the most popular and accessible type of political film, such as *BURN*, is only having a marginal political impact if it is being shown at \$3.50 a ticket in an art theater in an upper middle class neighborhood. We have to ask who is actually seeing films.

In Dayton, Ohio, this past summer, a group of radicals called the Community Media Workshop developed a significant project. In six different working class neighborhoods, they set up media programs in the public parks. The evening shows, called Summer Lights, combined local talent such as country music singers, radical films, some socialist speakers on current issues such as a campaign to fight utility rate increases, and a community slide-and-tape show. Members of the group went into the communities in advance, taking slide photos and interviewing people in the neighborhood about themselves, their concerns, and their community. In the process of making the slide-and-tape shows, considerable interest was generated for the big night. Augmented by posters and leaflets, every show had a good opening night with attentive viewers of all ages.

The audiences not only had a chance to see and hear themselves, but also to hear their neighbors talking in their own wards about local issues. The slide-and-tape shows combined recognition (such as a comic survey of all the dogs on a block), new experiences (a set of interviews

with women on what they think of the wages-for-housework idea) and learning (a lesson on electric company rip-offs). Following the first show, the media teams returned to do material for a second, and in some cases a third. Responses to the shows and the organizers were extremely positive. Begun as the test of an idea, the project is continuing by concentrating on two communities where additional political work will be going on.

This project and the DEC forums in Toronto are exemplary combinations of radical media work with political efforts, with each complementing and strengthening the other. Both projects have a very specific aim and context, which are their strengths, and both suggest new possibilities for using films politically.

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